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ASN-213
23 September 2005

Foreword

This past summer I began talking to an ex-girlfriend of mine after a six month hiatus. We talked about a lot, but I found her newly adopted interest in the practice and study of Buddhism one of the most interesting topics. At first I thought Buddhism's foundation of non-desire and non-confrontation too simplistic to be realistic. I began to respect her more and more for how she was living her life and how much more mature she seemed since six months prior. It was at this point that I decided it couldn't hurt to take on some of the religion's aspects in order to better myself. Learning that the Tibet course I had signed up to take would be dealing with Buddhism made me think that this transition couldn't come at a better time.

Introduction

“I want you to write down three things you already know about Tibet, as well as three things that you want to learn from taking this class.”

Great, I think to myself. Everyone in this class is either an Asian studies major or already has a solid foundation on the country’s history and culture. What do I know? I know that the Dalai Lama is from Tibet, and most of its people are Buddhists. I quickly scribble down what I hope are facts, however vague they may be. The only sentence I wrote with one hundred percent conviction fell under the “things that you want to learn” category. “I want to learn more about Tibetan Buddhism.”

Truth of Suffering

The sound of cars passing by on the rain soaked streets inhibits my ability to hear the pastor. I look around me and wonder why everyone is so sad. Walt was ninety three when he died and he led an amazing life.

As the memorial ends, I follow my parents upstairs for coffee and a small selection of cookies. I must walk slowly. The majority of the people ahead of me need assistance from both the few people under seventy who attended as well as their walkers and canes. I do not have to read about it to know that life is suffering. It's a Friday afternoon and I have no classes. As we make our way inside of the small, stuffy room, I look around. The woman on my left, one of Walt's daughters, just had a heart transplant. The man I am carrying on a conversation with is suffering from dementia as we speak. He needs his son to help him through the simplest of dialogue.

“I’m currently a student at Hobart College in Geneva.”

“I went to Cornell.”

“With help from Uncle Sam Pops.”

“Ah that’s really cool. What did you study?”

He trails off muttering something. “Can’t” and “recall” are the only two words I catch. Luckily his son leans over and whispers something in his ear.

“Really? I studied chemistry?”

I feel numb. Not because I have the mental capacity to disconnect myself from the suffering all around me, but the exact opposite. It feels as if it’s the only way I can deal

with this situation. I understand and accept the Buddhist teachings as both wise and a wise way to live, but this is just a reminder that I have a long way to go until I can experience them firsthand. I can't help but think to myself that a simple act of attending a memorial in order to give my condolences is in itself an act of suffering. I separated myself from something pleasant. An act of kindness led to suffering. Ironic.

Truth of Arising

I glance down to catch the last of my ginger colored camel as it is engulfed in a sea of burning embers. Though my body is satisfied, my mind is anything but. Didn't I make a promise to myself last night after reading *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction*? I reach over the ashtray and grab for my book. "The desire of a chain-smoker for another cigarette is *tanha*, since its aim is nothing more than short-term gratification. Such a desire is compulsive, limiting and

cyclic: it leads nowhere but to the next cigarette (and, as a side effect, to ill health). The desire of a chain-smoker to give up smoking, on the other hand, would be a virtuous desire since it would break the cyclic pattern of a compulsive negative habit and enhance health and well-being” (Keown 50-51).

Lifting myself off the couch, I make my way towards dinner with another cigarette pressed between my lips. An addict truly does embody the fact that desire is suffering. This isn't even a noble desire. It's purely sensual. It's not enlightenment or non-existence that I am lusting for. It's a chemical fixation that I can't live without. How juvenile. I pop the rest of my Camel into a Butt Stop. I might as well attempt to follow Right Action by not flicking my butts. If I can't take care of my body, then there's no need in making it worse by not taking care of the Earth.

Truth of Cessation

The double glass doors swing open to reveal another temptation. A new issue of The Martini has just come out. This student run publication has been a longstanding joke amongst my friends. I sit down at a round table. Everyone's laughing at a sixteen line run on sentence. Damn, I think in my head. That's pretty sad that the editor allows this person to justify his writing as stream of consciousness. I eat my dinner quietly and leave. Nothing positive will come of me voicing my negative opinions.

Is this Right Livelihood? Right Effort? It feels like both. Having the self control not to talk behind someone's back is more gratifying than the action itself. Still, it takes a lot of effort not to when there are so many opportunities in the world. How can I not be critical when there is so much suffering going on in New Orleans? This topic is played out. The government messed up big time. I'm frustrated. My

negative comments on top of everyone else's won't change anything for the better. I'm going to continue to keep my mouth shut.

Conclusion

I faltered again. In an attempt to meditate, another conflict is brought up. It's always been easy for me to clear my mind and last night was no exception. But how do I pray? How do I ask God to bless over those in need? I know the people ravished by Katrina certainly need all the help they can get. Is that just a desire though? Can I remain Roman Catholic and attempt to follow Buddhism at the same time? I feel guilty. Ugh, another emotion that is unnecessary. Emotion. I have a long way to go.

Works Cited

Keown, Damien. *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction*.
Oxford: Oxford, 1996.

